Compassion Fatigue: Are You at Risk?

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E.
P., a 34-year-old oncology staff nurse, felt like she was losing control of her life. She felt a sense of dread and fatigue each morning when her alarm went off. How could she make it through one more day trying to balance her family life, her job, and caring for her mother, whose senile dementia was gradually worsening every day? E.P. could not really remember the last time she felt energetic and positive, nor could she pinpoint when she began to feel so overwhelmed.

E.P. had been married for 13 years to her college sweetheart. He was in sales and worked out of the home, which, she felt, often added to the chaos of their lives. Their children came soon after marriage and were now embarking on adolescence—a daughter, 12, and a son, 10. The children seemed to fight continuously for inconsequential reasons, and her daughter was beginning to challenge E.P. in every arena: clothes, music, friends, homework, and curfew. E.P.’s husband played a passive role in their childcare, and E.P. often did not feel supported when she attempted to set guidelines or expectations for the children. Caring for her mother was adding additional stress and her only sibling lived out of state and was not available to assist her in handling the physical, emotional, or financial aspects of her mother’s care.

E.P. had studied nursing in college and began working immediately after graduation. She worked in general medical-surgical units initially; looking back, she remembered being enthusiastic and eager to go to work every day. Nursing was not just a job for her. E.P. felt that nursing was a profession and, at one time, she had hoped to further her education; he would express his feelings that “a nurse is a nurse; just a nurse.” Unexpectedly, rearing her daughter began to feel more, not less, demanding. At times, E.P. felt that her daughter would challenge her on every occasion and keep their relationship at arm’s length. She missed feeling close to her daughter but tried to understand her need for independence. Her son seemed always distant. When she would visit her mother, she would leave feeling depressed; as if her mother was dying slowly in front of her. At work, E.P. continued to feel emotionally close to her patients and their families but, unknowingly, she was unable to leave their grief and issues at work. She began to wake up at night dreaming about a patient or fearing that a patient she cared for would die before she got back to work in the morning. Several nightmares included fears of injury to her children resulting in their own death. Months had passed since she had gone jogging, and she was unable to concentrate on her studies, often finding herself sitting for hours preoccupied with feelings of fear or anxiety. She began to feel incompetent at work, at home, and with her studies. E.P. felt angry at her husband for his lack of understanding and support in all areas of her life and she would shutter if he attempted to show any signs of affection or intimacy. She felt her life was like a roller coaster out of control and that no one, not even her own friends and colleagues, could keep her on the track. As her isolation increased, so did her loneliness. Feelings of despair would erupt when a patient or family member was in despair, and she began to feel their loss as her loss, too.